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Soziales Lernen in den Niederlanden

Community Learning in the Netherlands

In the last few years a new discussion has developed in Dutch society. The current changes in Western countries of increasing individualism, diversity in cultures, materialism and a growing sense of uncertainty have made us rethink the values of the community. The school is seen as an institution that not only teaches children knowledge, but is also responsible for minding the personal development and upbringing of the child. In the discussions on morals and safety, schools are seen as a crucial place for making interventions on children's development. Being aware of the necessity of making a statement and acting upon new issues in society, the Dutch government has thought of several actions to be taken for improving the sense of safety and responsibility of individuals. One of those actions is the stimulation of community learning in the educational system. Community learning strengthens the connection of schools to society, and might therefore positively influence the preparation of students for their roles as responsible and moral members of society.

The Dutch government has invited *CPS Educational development and advice* to cooperate as a consulting partner in a new educational development on community learning in Dutch secondary schools. The Dutch community learning concept offers children a chance to learn taking responsibility for a community task in a real life situation. Whether the community learning takes place in the school building or outside, the tasks will always meet a community need. It can vary from helping other students doing their homework or organising a school party, to making a radio program for a hospital or designing the decoration of a square in the neighbourhood.

At the moment CPS monitors ten schools that have recently started their community learning programs. In this monitor project CPS co-operates with Civiq, a national consulting organisation for volunteer service. Visiting the participating schools together, Civiq and CPS can observe and consult every party involved in the process. Most pilot schools offer their students a learning experience outside the school building. For finding organisations interested in taking in students, schools try to find negotiating volunteer centres. In Holland these centres are quite common. Their activities are usually centred around matching volunteers and organisations. Being well connected to the local organisations that need volunteers regularly, these volunteer centres are valuable negotiators for schools that look for community learning environments for their students. A challenge in the community learning concept is bridging the distance between education and volunteer service. In the monitor project a bridge is built between those areas by combining CPS as an education con-

sulting organisation and Civiq as a volunteer service consulting organisation. Likewise, the financiers are the ministry of education and the ministry of social affairs.

An interesting finding in the monitor project is the enormous variety in the way schools design their community learning. Each school seems to shape community learning into a unique design, adjusted to the possibilities and needs of its pupil groups and the chances and demands of the schools environment. Schools make choices regarding the place of community learning in the education program, ways of certification, amounts of invested time, students' level of influence, etc.

To give an impression of the varieties visible in secondary schools, a brief impression follows of three secondary schools that participate in the monitor project:

1. The school in Den Haag is a school for lower level secondary education. The students visiting this school are mostly immigrants' children and children from socially disadvantaged families. The students enjoy coming to school and often stay on the school area even after classes have finished, only returning home when the school closes at five. The school chose this free period, between the last classes and the school closing, as the territory for community learning. An archive box was placed in the central hall way, and filled with little jobs the students can choose. Ninety different jobs are offered to the children, some small, some bigger. A few examples: "Make Easter decorations for the math class room"; "Write a tour around the school for visitors"; "Help welcoming visitors to the schools' open house party". Encouraged by their mentors, the students are eager to take on the jobs. The principal of the school was proud to tell CPS about the 32 students that were interested in helping out during the open house party recently.
2. The school in Assen already has some experience in practising the community learning concept. In the higher classes of the high level secondary school, students are obliged to choose some sort of community learning. For three years this has been a regular part of the educational program. Students make their own choices in what to do, living up to the rule that it cannot be a job for a family member. They discuss their choices with the teacher, who is especially qualified to monitor the community learning activities. The students contact the organisation of their choice by themselves and plan their own work. The concept is well known with the organisations in this town. When a students calls them, they usually are already "familiar" with the concept.
3. The schools in Tilburg seem to be in a excellent position. The volunteer centre in this town has initiated a project on community learning. With local governmental

funds an employee has been qualified for a part-time job for two years to help the town develop community learning. Several schools and organisations are joining the program. The schools are offered two free classes on volunteer work and free help on matching students to organisations. In the first lesson students will get general information on volunteer service. In the second lesson students make an ad about themselves, showing their skills and areas of interest. The volunteer centre analyses these ads and tries to make an interesting match between the individual student and an organisation. Organisations are offered all the help they need. From chopping up tasks to student-size proportions, to guiding the students during their activities, the centre assists the organisation. Both organisations, schools, students and the volunteer centre are very happy with the results of this project.

To help schools in making their own suitable choices in the community learning implementation process, CPS has developed a guidebook, containing examples of good practices, practical advice and a checklist of the choices that need to be made. The conclusions of the monitor project will be published in October 2004.

The community learning concept is not obligated for schools. With the help of the monitor project the Dutch government wants to get a clear picture of the benefits and chances of the concept. Since the first results have indicated a positive reaction of schools and students on community learning, a second project has been outlined for promotion and implementation of community learning into the secondary schools. Again CPS and Civiq are working together. To promote and implement community learning in the Dutch school system, a website, an information video and a helpdesk will be developed in 2004.

The Dutch government is aware of the importance of the chances community learning has for society as a whole. It has set an aim of 25% of the secondary schools to offer community learning to their students by the year 2007. Also, to be well informed by important partners in education, the government has set out a series of expert meetings, to receive input for outlining the educational policy for the coming years. A main focus in these meetings are the social tasks of the educational system.

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